

Jessica Herlihy  
39 Walter Avenue  
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Dear Chairman McCrory, Chairman Sanchez, Ranking Member Berthel, Ranking Member McCarty, Vice Chairs, and distinguished members of the committee,

My name is Jessica Herlihy and I'm from Norwalk. I am a parent and Non-Profit Director that is active in the community. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of H.B. 5283.

I am testifying in support of this bill because we need to ensure that all students have access to the resources necessary to support their specific learning needs to thrive in the classroom and beyond. Of Norwalk's almost 12,000 students, 74% identify as students of color (BIPOC), and according to the State Department of Education, Norwalk allocates \$19,770 per pupil spending, while 68% of our students are identified as high needs.

As compared to our neighboring towns, such as Wilton and Darien, which allocate over \$22,000 per pupil spending and roughly 20% of their student population are high needs. These figures show the disproportionality between the number of students in need, and the dollars the students receive depending on the school system. The only difference between students in neighboring towns receiving more funds, and students in Norwalk, is their zip code.

In addition to the disadvantages Norwalk students are already facing, the town is set to lose its Alliance District status. This means that while our school district is performing better than before, and has outperformed the metrics of the program, this results in a gradual decrease of funds received annually. Year after year, our students have been improving and our community, teachers, and administrators have increased our ability to meet each student's individual needs and give them the resources to prosper. Taking away this funding will decimate the progress that's been made.

The COVID-19 pandemic even further highlighted the funding gap. We've seen firsthand the impact the pandemic has had on our students and community. A recent Norwalk survey done in 2021, showed that almost half (46.2%) of our high school students reported experiencing depression or symptoms of depression, which is 15% percent higher than the 2019 statewide high school rate, identified by the CT Youth Risky Behavior Survey. With the upcoming loss of ESSER funds, we could see a further reduction in critical mental health support staff when they will be needed the most to curb the impending mental health crisis, especially among our youth.

With this knowledge – and the fact that our school district is facing a looming threat of the impending federal fiscal cliff due to the loss of ESSER funding – we know that now more than ever, Norwalk and our State can only bridge this financial gap with the influx of additional funds.

We are grateful that this bill recognizes the need to create a more equitable Connecticut, both racially and socio-economically, and will take steps to bring us closer to that reality. Though this bill alone will not completely close the racial funding gap, it does put our state on the right path by beginning the conversation. Thank you for your time today and I urge you to support this bill.

Sincerely,

Jessica Herlihy

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